

Lockwood-Mathews Mansion Museum's 'About Women' exhibition 'bridges time'

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Bethel artist Nina Buxenbaum's painting "Cousins" is on display in the Lockwood-Mathews Mansion Museum's exhibit "About Women."

Photo: Lockwood-Mathews Mansion Museum / Contributed photo

There's a glitch in the matrix at the Lockwood-Mathews Mansion Museum in Norwalk, where the men's billiards room has been taken over by 42 women artists from the Silvermine Arts Center.

They all have work in “About Women,” a long-running, collaborative exhibit intended to celebrate women artists during the centennial year of the 19th amendment. The exhibit, however, looks and feels entirely different inside the mansion than it would in the white-walled Silvermine galleries, or any place else for that matter.

The difference only begins with the mansion’s history. When the financier and railroad investor LeGrand Lockwood moved into the mansion in 1868, women artists were about as unrecognized as women’s right to vote. Lockwood and his wife Ann Louisa were progressive patrons of the arts, yet their extensive collection appears to have contained just one woman artist.

She was the sculptor Emma Stebbins, who has the distinction of being the first woman commissioned to do a public sculpture in New York City, museum executive director Susan Gilgore said. The sculpture is the now-beloved “Angel of the Waters” statue in Central Park’s Bethesda fountain.

Stebbins’ Angel was originally scorned, however. It was greeted with “revulsion” as a “feebly-pretty, idealess thing of bronze,” according to a New York Times obituary published last year as part of its reparative series on remarkable people whose deaths the paper had overlooked.

For the Lockwoods, the mansion rotunda served as a gallery. A Stebbins’ sculpture, a marble figure of a praying child, was likely displayed there, along with their most famous painting, the enormous “Domes of the Yosemite” landscape by Albert Beirstadt. The Lockwoods did not occupy the mansion for long. It and their art collection were sold after he lost his fortune in the gold panic of 1869.

Fast forward 130 years or so to when the museum began staging art exhibits in the billiards room. The design of the room — it has high ceilings, dark wainscoting and walls divided into paneled sections — combined with the mansion’s status as a national historic landmark imposed restrictions.

Gail Ingis, a longtime trustee and co-chair of contemporary art exhibits, said previous exhibits were limited to 25 or 30 pieces, none more than five or six feet wide, because of the width of the panels. “If we have a two-artist show, each gets half the space. If it’s a group show, each artist might get one or two pieces,” she said.

Also, because the walls could not be interfered with in any way, paintings had to be hung “salon style,” that is suspended by wires from hooks attached to ceiling molding. Paintings were kept at eye level, too. That is until the “About Women” exhibit.

It is double the size of earlier exhibits, because some of the 42 Silvermine Guild artists are represented by more than one piece. Of necessity, paintings and photographs, interspersed with monoprints and flat sculptures, climb high up the walls. Viewers must crane their necks to see the uppermost, like the Ridgefield artist Barbara Ringer's chilling tableaux of wide-eyed dolls or the Greenwich artist Carol Dixon's exuberant embroidered collage.

Ingis said it is the first latter-day exhibit hung in full salon style. Roger Mudre, the Silvermine gallery director who did the curation, said he had Boston's Gardner Museum in mind when planning it out. "Part of my issue was making it all fit, and still leave air space," he said. "It's not as easy as being in your own gallery. You can't just put nails or screws in the wall, because it's historic."

The idea for a shared exhibit was broached last year in a conversation Ingis said she had with Silvermine board chair Rose-Marie Fox. At one stage, Ingis said she, Fox, Mudre and Gilgore sat in the billiards room for a brainstorming session. Ultimately, their thinking shifted from a show with a women's theme, that might have included men, to one dedicated to women artists.

"This is pretty much the first time we've exhibited exclusively women," Gilgore said. "It's interesting, if you visit the museum docents tell visitors the billiards room was a quintessentially male-dominated space. That's where men went to play billiards, while women withdrew to play cards or do other female activities."

Mudre said his main concern in mounting the exhibit was to give "a broad overview of what our female artists are doing, anywhere from abstract to very realistic subject matter." Except for the physical challenges posed by the billiards room, his focus was on the present, not the past.

The exhibit, however, bridges time. When the billiards room, and most of art, belonged to men, impressionism was brand new and pure abstraction probably inconceivable, even to artists.

Yet, here in the "About Women" billiards room, a molten color blast in oil by the Easton painter Susan Sharp is caddy corner from the Westport photographer Nancy Breakstone's unaltered, equally abstract, image of tide-washed sand.

Intentionally or not, other pieces do seem to connect more directly with the past. A photographed tableau of fabricated dogs playing poker by Joan Wheeler of Easton echoes the comic series done by Cassius Coolidge at the turn of the last century. Paired portraits of a woman in profile by Pam Ackley of New Canaan seem to go back further. In one, the woman's dark hair is severely pulled back. In the other, her jagged bangs are held in place by what the painting's title identifies as a "Mourning Bonnet." The background in both is dark and devoid of identifying detail. Both also are done in oil and framed in dark wood. They're new, but they look old, older than even the billiards room. (Ackley, whose portraits blend classical and contemporary, is co-founder of two different women's artist groups that meet in Bridgeport. One uses live models.)

Another portrait of sorts, one that perhaps most clearly marks the growth of women's art, is a large oil painting titled "Cousins" by Nina Buxenbaum of Bethel. In her artist's statement she describes herself as biracial and concerned with the metamorphosis of identity.

In "Cousins" a dark-skinned young woman in a white gown kneels over her prone, light-skinned twin. They could be lovers or rival goddesses, but in the billiards room the frilly gown looks borrowed from a Degas ballerina.

To some degree, all the artwork in the exhibit gains from the dislocation of time. Maybe it's the patina of age, or a sense of retroactive embrace. Gilgore said she's noticed visitors tend to stop in front of Buxenbaum's "Cousins."

"The Lockwoods were forward thinking in many ways. So having an exhibition of only women, titled 'About Women,' I think the Lockwoods would completely understand it and be very proud of it.

The exhibit runs to Jan. 3 and can be seen on mansion tours now offered four days a week.

Joel Lang is a freelance writer.



"Karina and Irene" by Rita Baunok will be on display in the exhibit. Photo: Lockwood-Mathews Mansion Museum / Contributed photo



The "About Women" exhibit features the artwork by 42 different women artists. "Mutant Turf" is a piece by April Hammock. Photo: Lockwood-Mathews Mansion Museum / Contributed photos



Lockwood-Mathews Mansion Museum Photo: Contributed photo



"Full House" by Easton artist Joan Wheeler. Photo: Lockwood-Mathews Mansion Museum / Contributed photo